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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 004693

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: NEZAVISIMAYA GAZETA UNDER INQUIRY

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Classified By: POL Officer Robert Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Things are getting uncomfortable for the leadership at Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NG), one of Russia's leading "opposition" newspapers, in what appears to be an attempt by associates of Agriculture Minister Gordeyev to silence criticism of his business activities. NG deputy editor and journalist Boris Zemtsov, who this summer had written articles criticizing Gordeyev's business activities, was arrested on September 12 and charged with extortion and bribery related to an alleged arrangement with Anas Nurutdinov, Gordeyev's assistant. Top leaders at the newspaper -- including the owner Konstantin Remchukov -- are feeling the pressure and appear shaken by what they see as a politicized attack. END SUMMARY.

The Case Against NG

12. (U) According to press reports, Zemtsov was arrested while leaving a restaurant meeting with Nurutdinov, allegedly with an envelope full of cash in his possession. He was held without bail because the court considered him a "flight risk" and had concerns that he could pressure witnesses if released. On September 19, the court indicted Zemtsov for extortion; he is accused of demanding a payment of \$30,000 from Nurutdinov in exchange for not publishing negative articles about Gordeyev over the next two months. The authorities searched Zemtsov's office and apartment, reportedly finding narcotics and a large knife (technically an illegal weapon) -- potential justification for further indictments.

13. (U) Zemtsov has publicly denied any wrongdoing. He claims that Nurutdinov and Yuliya Goncharova, the press secretary of the state-owned company Soyuzplodoimport, had come to him with a business proposition to publish "informational - advertising" materials about the work of the Agriculture Ministry and Soyuzplodoimport in NG. Zemtsov further claims that he insisted on a transparent payment process through a bank or the bookkeeper at the newspaper. In comments to the press, he has characterized the case against him as a "provocation" and NG has taken the same line in its publications.

14. (U) Remchukov complained to Embassy officers that the investigation and treatment of Zemtsov has been marked with disregard for administrative procedures. The authorities initially denied Zemtsov access to his lawyer; she was only able to meet with him for the first time late on September 14, two days after his arrest. They surprised the defense team with the announcement of the hearing and denied them timely information. For example, Remchukov told POLFF the

authorities faxed a message at 10:07 in the morning to give notice of a 10:15 hearing. Zemtsov had no legal representation when his indictment was read, according to press accounts.

15. (U) Zemtsov is appealing his incarceration, seeing no reason for a suspect in a white-collar crime case to be held in pre-trial confinement. Remchukov voiced concern to POLOFF that Zemtsov would soon be moved from the relative comfort of the pre-trial detention "isolator" to darker and more dangerous holdings at one of Moscow's jails. (According to press, Zemtsov now shares a cell with he describes as "sane" bunkmates and says he is considering working on a long-planned book project. It is doubtful he would be as comfortable at the Butyrka prison.)

Remchukov Under Scrutiny

16. (C) On the evening of September 19, Remchukov was questioned by the authorities about the extortion case. Afterwards, he came to a reception at the Ambassador's residence and was visibly upset. He told several Embassy officers that he had been interrogated for several hours and - his lawyers counted - asked 312 questions. He said he had no doubt that the case against Zemtsov was politically motivated, "an attempt to silence" his newspaper, but he was not sure of the source of the problem. He expressed confidence that the case was "under Putin's control" as well as the Procurator's office.

17. (C) In a telephone conversation with the Ambassador on September 20, Remchukov had regained his composure. He reiterated his uncertainty about the motivation behind the legal case, but said he considered it a "shot across the bow" of his newspaper. He said he plans to fight back with his legal team and that he was confident in his abilities and

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those of NG. He also told the Ambassador that he was not looking for any U.S. assistance in the matter.

18. (C) COMMENT: Ekho Moskvu editor-in-chief Aleksey Venediktov and political scientist Andrey Piontkovskiy told Embassy officers that they see the case as revenge by Gordeyev for Zemtsov's articles against him and his interests. The fact that Zemtsov was willing to meet and negotiate with Nurutdinov - allegedly for advertising in the paper - is confusing given the correspondent's long-standing public criticism of the Agriculture Ministry. In his comments to Embassy staff, Remchukov admitted that there might be something to the charges, but insisted that he would hold the authorities accountable for the procedures by which they handled this case. To that end, he said that he had bought a copy of the criminal code and would be carrying it with him over the coming weeks.

19. (C) If in fact Gordeyev is behind this indictment, it would not be the first time that he has successfully used the judicial system to attack his political enemies. Gordeyev removed a rival for his ministerial post, Leonid Kholod, from contention some years back by engineering an indictment for murder. To the surprise of many, Kholod was acquitted of the charges, but not before suffering a stress-induced heart attack and seeing his political ambitions completely derailed. END COMMENT.
Russell